

[By Howard Weiss-Tisman, Brattleboro Reformer](#)

As Vermont's Congressional delegation pleads its case to Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to deliver emergency aid to the state's dairy farmers as soon as possible, they will be competing with lawmakers from every other dairy producing state in the nation.

And with dairy farmers losing money on every gallon of milk that leaves the farm, legislators from the Western states are trying to make sure that their farmers are not forgotten when the money is delivered.

Congress this week reached an agreement on providing \$350 million in emergency assistance to dairy farmers who are facing one of the worst pricing slumps in recent memory.

But while lawmakers were able to get the emergency aid into the agriculture spending bill at the last minute, they left it up to Vilsack to decide how the money should be distributed.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., met with Vilsack Thursday, urging him to get the money into the hands of farmers as quickly as possible.

"Many Vermont farmers are hanging on by their fingernails and they need this vital assistance as soon as possible," Welch said. "I am hopeful (he) will expedite the process."

Welch is co-chairman of the 88-member Congressional Dairy Farmers Caucus, a national and bipartisan group of lawmakers who came together earlier this year to address the dairy crisis.

The caucus helped get the emergency assistance included in the farm bill, but now the members are pitted against each other as decisions are made on how the money will be divided.

Welch said Vilsack should use the system that is already in place which pays farmers when the price falls below a certain level, but caps those payments after they produce more than 3 million pounds of milk.

"Our goal was to help the small farmers," said Welch. "It was a struggle to get the \$350 million and if the money is allocated on a per cow basis the amount going to small farmers would be so low that it would hardly make a difference."

Western lawmakers, however, want a different method, saying the current system disproportionately benefits small dairy farmers.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said she was requesting an urgent meeting with Vilsack to discuss the matter and promised to object to any vote on a larger agriculture bill before she met with him.

Boxer said she had serious concerns that the spending "will be used in a way that discriminates against dairies in Western states."

Sen. Bernard Sanders, D-Vt., said earlier this week that the money should not go to "corporate farms," and he said he would work to convince Vilsack that family farms in Vermont need the money more than the mega-farms in places like Arizona, California and Texas.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has so far issued no details on how it will allocate the money among the nation's farmers.

"USDA has been working hard to provide assistance to struggling dairy farmers over the last several months and we stand ready to implement the provisions in the conference report as quickly as possible when it's passed by Congress and signed into law," USDA press secretary Caleb Weaver said in an e-mail message late Friday. "The department will implement these provisions in a way that's consistent with the intent of Congress."

Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., who also represents a state with smaller family farms, said lawmakers from across the nation worked to get the money included and they will now have to walk a fine line between distributing the money fairly and getting as much as they can for their constituents.

"On this issue you try your best to be as objective as possible and as sensitive as you can to other regions' points of view," Casey said. "But ... you have to represent your states interests and fight very hard."